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SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: LIBERIA: SUDDEN DEATH OF MONROVIA-AREA SENATOR

REF: MONROVIA 567

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. Montserrado County Senator Hanna Brent of the opposition Congress for Democratic Change (CDC) died in Monrovia on August 3. The cause of death has not been made public. Senator Brent is the sixth legislator to die since January 2006. The race to succeed her is expected to be intense given that Monrovia's Montserrado County, the most populous county, is inhabited by Liberians from across the country. Major parties are expected to use it as an electoral practice run before 2011's general election. END SUMMARY.

SUDDEN DEATH OF SENATOR AT AGE 46

¶2. (U) Senator Hanna Brent (46), representative of Monrovia-centered Montserrado County, died suddenly on Monday, August 3, after a brief illness. No details on the cause of death have been released. Shocked senators cancelled their August 4 plenary session in a show of respect. President Pro Tempore Cletus Wotorson described Brent as an "energetic, friendly and pleasant lady who dedicated her services to the Liberian people." Brent is the third Senator to die in office since the inauguration of the 52nd Legislature in 2006. Three members of the House of Representatives also died during the same period. Brent's death also could reduce the Female Legislative Caucus' numbers. (5 Senators and 9 Representatives are women.)

BY-ELECTION A TEST FOR 2011 ELECTIONS

¶3. (SBU) According to Article 37 of the Liberian Constitution, "In the event of a vacancy in the Legislature caused by death, resignation, expulsion or otherwise, the presiding officer shall within 30 days notify the Elections Commission thereof. The Elections Commission (NEC) shall not later than 90 days thereafter cause a by-election to be held." The NEC should soon begin preparations for what is expected to be a hotly contested by-election given that Montserrado's population, migrated to Monrovia from around the country, represents one-third of Liberia's population, and all major ethnic groups. The CDC (which holds the most seats in Liberia's legislature) won both Senate seats in Montserrado County in 2005, but President Sirleaf's Unity Party (UP) is gaining strength in the region. With the CDC suffering from internal squabbles, the UP, which is already preparing for the next general election (Reftel), might have the edge. However, Sirleaf's party lost the last senatorial by-election in River Gee County.

¶4. (SBU) COMMENT. Senator Brent's unexpected death, followed by an outpouring of grief, is proof of her local popularity. We expect the by-election for her successor to be used by Sirleaf's UP and other parties as a litmus test to gauge their popularity among Liberians given that Montserrado residents represent most of the country's major ethnic groups. END COMMENT.

THOMAS-GREENFIELD